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C E N T R A L I N T E L L I G E N C E A G E N C Y

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

13 November 1956

STAFF MEMO: 86-56

SUBJECT: The Crisis in Soviet-Satellite Relations

Background of the Crisis

1. Soviet policy in the Satellites since Stalin's death has been one of gradual, cautious, and limited reforms. This policy was mandatory in view of the effort to eliminate Stalinist excesses within the USSR itself. By eliminating the more overt and offensive forms of Soviet control, the Soviet leaders have sought to expand the Satellite regimes' basis of domestic support and to provide for other nations an attractive example of the benefits of socialism and cooperation with the USSR. Soviet control, exercised chiefly through the Satellite parties, has aimed to insure that this process should not go so fast or so far as to alter the political and economic structure of these countries or to impair Soviet military and foreign policy interests.

2. In embarking on this course, the Soviet leaders probably did not realize the strength of anti-Soviet feelings in some of the Satellite parties. They apparently failed to appreciate the damage done by the

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denunciations of Stalin to their own moral authority within the Satellite parties. Closely related to this, the Soviet leaders did not foresee that the downgrading of terror would permit criticism within these parties to widen into disputes which would engage non-party groups, where even stronger anti-Soviet sentiments would mix with outright anti-Communism. This process, occurring within the Polish and Hungarian parties, led to a breakdown of party unity and an acceleration of the reform movement to a point where Soviet interests were endangered, acutely so in the Hungarian case.

The Hungarian Problem

3. By the beginning of November the USSR was no longer able to stave off in Hungary, a direct choice between wholesale repression and the creation of an anti-Soviet, anti-Communist state. The latter outcome would have opened a portion of the Soviet frontier, gravely compromised the chance for controlled reforms in the other Satellites, and prejudiced the vital contention that socialism is the wave of the future. Under these circumstances, the diversion and Western disunity provided by the attack on Egypt were convenient but were almost certainly not determining for the character of the Soviet action.

4. For the future, together with the prospect of strong majority hostility to the USSR and Communism for years to come, the Soviet Union faces in Hungary the likelihood of continuing chaos in the months ahead. Confronted with slowdowns, strikes, guerrilla warfare, and perhaps terrorism, the decimated

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Hungarian party will probably need to rely heavily on Soviet personnel as well as troops for the tasks of reconstruction. Police and security measures required by the urgent need to disarm the population will negate most of the reforms promised by the puppet regime, and its claims to independence will remain incredible.

5. Once the current resistance has exhausted itself physically and psychologically, as seems inevitable, the Soviets and the Kadar regime will probably move to conciliate the population. This may include an attempt to introduce more acceptable personalities into the government. Ultimately, the USSR will hope to re-establish a regime which does not depend upon the massive presence of Soviet military force.

The Polish Problem: An Unstable Compromise

6. Poland avoided this fate in October because all the interested parties -- the USSR, factions within the Polish party, and the increasingly restive population -- were able to find common ground with Gomulka and his program. To the Soviet Union, Gomulka promised preservation of its military position, a dominant voice in Polish foreign policy, and maintenance in Poland of the basic features of socialism -- one-party rule and a nationalized economy -- all without violence. To the population, because of his martyr's background, he was able to gain credence for his internal reform and a large degree of sovereignty without the overthrow of Communism. Because of all these assets, he offered to the Polish party the only means of

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overcoming its divisions, remaining in power, and running its own affairs freed of direct Soviet domination.

7. Despite Gomulka's initial high popularity, there are important elements of instability in this compromise. In internal affairs, there are already signs that his regime has come into conflict with students seeking even greater independence, workers interested in a rapid extension of factory autonomy, peasants eager to dissolve collective farms and abolish compulsory deliveries, and intellectuals unwilling to accept new limitations on public criticism. All groups will be disappointed as it becomes evident that living standards cannot improve rapidly. Riding to power on the slogan of independence, he has had considerable difficulty in curbing anti-Soviet manifestations, including expressions of solidarity with the Hungarian revolution.

8. The USSR has a number of reasons to be suspicious of Polish prospects. Gomulka has long been notable among Satellite Communists for his advocacy of national independence from Soviet direction. The Soviet leaders probably can reconcile themselves only with difficulty to such measures as the removal of Rokossovsky and his colleagues, Polish feelers for Western credits, a retreat from collectivization, and the exposure of socialism's economic failures. In addition, they must be deeply concerned over the present unruliness of the Polish party and population, as expressed,

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for example, in spontaneous de-collectivization, the continued independent line of the Polish press and radio, or the rise of non-party organizations not under effective Communist discipline. They may fear that Gomulka lacks either the will or capability to impose the necessary discipline both within the party and in the country.

The Polish Problem: Possible Outcomes

9. Because of the Hungarian experience and Poland's strategic importance, the Soviet leaders would probably become sufficiently alarmed to intervene there before deterioration goes as far as it did in Hungary. This intervention probably would first appear as a demand that discipline be imposed upon the Polish party and population. Soviet military activities in and around Poland during the last week may have been related to such demands.

10. Gomulka, in the light of the Hungarian repression, would certainly wish to satisfy these demands. It is not at all certain, however, that he is capable of doing so. A report of a new division within the Politburo re-emphasized the fact that the party leaders elected Gomulka, not because he has their full support, but because he represented the only compromise acceptable to all concerned. Recent provincial party elections in many cases expressed spontaneous local processes rather than central direction. But even a completely unified party might be unable to fulfill probable Soviet demands. Official propaganda thus far has been concentrated largely

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on a single issue -- explanation of the need for the Polish-Soviet alliance as a matter of simple survival -- but have not been wholly successful.

11. The chances seem about even that Gomulka can persuade various restless elements to modify their demands enough to ease Soviet fears. If this persuasion fails, one possibility is that he will use strong police powers himself in order to forestall a Soviet use of force; carried out with discrimination, this policy could probably enable Poland to meet immediate Soviet requirements without provoking an anti-Communist outbreak. Another is that the USSR will give him additional time to meet its requirements. However, this is not likely if, as seems probable, on top of their basic misgivings, the Soviet leaders consider that the situation is failing to improve and that their own assets for internal influence in Poland, as represented by alternative leaders more responsive to Moscow, are being weakened or destroyed in military, party, and governmental reorganizations. Finally, there is the prospect of Soviet military intervention, preferably in the form of a coup followed by a puppet regime, but on the Hungarian scale if necessary.

12. The use of Soviet force in Poland probably would serve to decelerate the already slow pace of reforms in the other Satellites. It would tend to alienate Western Europeans, especially socialists, and to reunify NATO, but these consequences have already been incurred anyway in Hungary. Both

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Communist China and Yugoslavia, who accepted the Soviet course in Hungary, would be displeased with a repetition in Poland, and Tito, being particularly alarmed and embarrassed, would be considerably harder to deal with in the future. Nehru and other Asian leaders might be led to align themselves publicly with condonation of Soviet policy in Eastern Europe.

Prospects in the Other Satellites

13. Similar deterioration has not occurred within the other Satellites, where the imposition of party discipline has sufficed to silence demands for a faster pace or a broader scope of reforms. Party unity has not faced such special difficulties as were caused by Beirut's death in Poland and Rakosi's inability to recast himself in the post-Stalin mold. Neither are there good candidates in the other parties for the role of Gomulka. A more basic deterrent to reforms in those countries is the apprehension of present Satellite party leaders who distrust such reforms in principle and see in them a challenge to their own political positions. Once the present period of extreme vigilance is past the USSR will probably resume its policy of gradual and limited reform. The Soviet leaders probably have concluded that the USSR's position in the Satellites cannot be maintained without some compromise with national sentiments.

Effects on Soviet Leadership

14. In the USSR, collective leadership as an institution appears

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thus far to have survived the current crisis. While there is no firm evidence of a shift in influence within the collective, it is unlikely that such evidence would become available in advance of and perhaps even for some time after the event. The two most plausible changes -- a rise in the influence of the professional military leaders or of "hard line" politicians -- would probably increase the Soviet demands upon Poland and raise the likelihood of Soviet military intervention.

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